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ABSTRACT

The main objectives of this study were: to examine the problems faced by immigrant students (N=294) from the former Soviet Union studying for the practical engineering diploma; to examine their attitudes towards various aspects of training in the college, and to make recommendations that facilitate the absorption process of the immigrant students. Findings showed that most of the immigrant students indicated that they had enrolled in those colleges because they were looking for a profession that could be studied in a short period so they would be able to join the labor force as soon as possible. Most of the students surveyed (74%) preferred to study in Hebrew rather than in their mother tongue, 71% expressed the opinion that the teaching techniques used in the colleges suited them, and 81% preferred studying in mixed classes in which the number of immigrants were equal to that of the veteran students or in classes where the immigrants were a majority. As far as social integration was concerned, it was found that only 28% of the new immigrants visited veteran students' homes, and only 25% were visited by Israeli students. The most frequently mentioned suggestions for improvement relate to the attitude of teachers and the administration to immigrants and the network of ties with veteran Israeli students. Contains 16 references. (JRH)

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ABSORPTION AND ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS AMONG IMMIGRANT STUDENTS STUDYING FOR THE PRACTICAL ENGINEERING DEGREE IN ISRAEL

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Abstract

(a) Objectives

The main objectives of this survey were as follows:

1. To examine the problems faced by immigrant students from the former Soviet Union studying for the practical Engineer diploma.

2. To examine their attitudes towards various aspects of the training in the college.

3. To conclude what should be done in order to facilitate the absorption process of the immigrant students.

(b) Theoretical framework

This paper is focused on the problems of preparing young new immigrants to work. It deals with the training of young immigrant students (aged 18 to 23) in obtaining a vocation that would enable them to get jobs and join the labour force as soon as possible.

The educational background of these students is sufficient for higher education, but they enroll in a post secondary framework for practical engineers, in order to gain a vocation in a relatively short time (twenty four months) and be able to support themselves and their families.

In 1992, 1250 immigrant students from the former Soviet Union enrolled in colleges for Practical Engineers with 27% enrolling as first year students.

For students who enter an educational framework immediately after immigration, the language barrier may influence self confidence, cause anxiety, embarrassment tension and confusion.

For these reasons it was decided to carry out this survey in order to decide what should be done in order to facilitate the absorption process.

The conclusions of this survey could help other people in facing problems of this kind all over the world.

(c) Methods, techniques and data source

In 1992, questionnaries were distributed to new immigrants studying at four colleges and data was collected.The colleges were from Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, Haifa and the Northern part of Israel. 294 questionnaires were collected from immigrant students who were studying various technological subjects for the practical engineering diploma.

(d) Results

Findings showed that most of the immigrant students said they had enrolled in those colleges because they were looking for a profession that could be studied in a short period (24 months), so that they would be able to join the labour force as soon as possible. About 70% of them were studying in preparatory classes and most of them said that studying in these classes facilitated their skipping over future studies.

It can also be said that most of them (74%) preferred to study in Hebrew rather than in their mother tongue. 71% expressed the opinion that the teaching techniques used in the colleges suited them. Most of them (68%) were studying in classes made up of new immigrants or in mixed classes in which the immigrants were the majority. Nevertheless, 81% preferred studying in mixed classes in which the number of immigrants were equal to that of the veteran students or in classes where the immigrants were a majority.

About 78% expressed the wish that the examinations administered in the colleges helped them show their best ability and knowledge. 53% preferred the multiple choice type examination, and as far as language was concerned, it was seen that 60% of the immigrant students preferred to be examined in Hebrew in spite of their language difficulty.

About 55% felt that their economic status was lower than in their native country. It was also seen that 38% worked at various jobs during their studies. About 98% of the immigrants lived in accommodation with two people living in one room (on the average). About half of them (46%) shared apartments with at least one other family. 79% of them mentioned that they did homework at home and about 67% purchased books out of their own expenses. Most of them felt that their self image esteem as students had fallen.

As far as social integration was concerned, it was found that only 28% of the new immigrants visited veteran students' homes, and only 25% were visited by Israeli students.

In spite of all the abovementioned phenomena, 93% expressed the wish to carry on with their studies at the same college. About 74% said that they would recommend an immigrant friend to study at the same college. Most of them recommended improving teachers' and veteran students' attitude towards the newcomers.

Keywords: Immigrants, Absorption & Adjustment Problems, Practical Engineering.

1. Background

In the early 1990s, Israel experienced a massive wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union. Its absolute and relative size, its unexpected timing, its pace (reaching about 35,000 per month at its peak), and its special demographic and cultural features raised problems in a number of areas [1]. In general, the situation of immigrants is laden with the potential for personal crisis due to the many changes that they experience [2]. These include essential changes along several dimensions: the personal dimension, the social dimension, and the national dimension. Although lack of proficiency in the new language -- the main factor in communication with the environment -- constitutes a special difficulty, the most urgent problems that need to be solved in order to "survive" in the new environment are income (work) and housing.

This article focuses on the problems involved in preparing young immigrants for their work life. It deals with the training of immigrant students (aged 18 to 23) in a profession that will allow them to get a job and join the labor force as soon as possible. However, it should also be noted that, although long-term educational goals may stand in conflict with short-term economic interests, educational institutions also serve to bridge cultural and social gaps [3-8].

Israel's colleges for the training of technicians and practical engineers absorbed about 1,250 new immigrants from the Soviet Union in the 1992 Academic Year (27% of all first-year students enrolled in this two-year course). A number of western countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia, Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, as well as Israel, have a high rate of immigrants in their school population. In all these countries, educators are constantly seeking

out ways to cope with the problems related to the special needs of their immigrant students. This issue is discussed at length by Fix and Zimmerman [9] and Wilcox [10]. Content analysis of research conducted in this area reveals two main models of immigrant absorption by educational institutions: the assimilation model and the integration model.

The assimilation approach advocates that immigrant students be treated in the same way as all other students. Accordingly, the status of the immigrants is "deproblemized" and their difficulties are viewed as merely technical. In contrast, according to the integration approach, the special status of "immigrant student" is legitimized, the intrinsic problems associated with this status are acknowledged, and an effort is made to help solve them [11].

A third approach is provided by Karnieli [12] who sees the above two models as representing the two poles of a continuum: at the one extreme, the assimlation approach, which expects the immigrant to discard his/her previous cultural identity and to be transformed into an Israeli as quickly as possible and, at the other extreme, the integration approach, which sees the absorption of the immigrant as a long-term educational process involving integration into the new society and the new culture while, at the same time, preserving and acknowledging elements of the original culture. The continuum approach recognizes the concept of a pluralistic multicultural society and the reciprocal influence of the different cultures contained within it. This approach allows for freedom of action on the the part of the administration and the teaching staff in their decisions concerning the absorption of immigrant students. Accordingly, elements from the two extreme models can be chosen and an appropriate model be created that will serve the special needs and conditions of the college.

Indeed, in a survey conducted in 1992 [13], the continuum approach was found to best describe the attitude of lecturers in the colleges for practical engineers and technicians in Israel. It was found that elements were adopted from each of the two extreme models in accordance with the special needs and conditions of the immigrant population attending the college. Be that as it may, there was a marked tendency to prefer the assimilation model over the integration model. This may be attributed to the fact that the goal of these colleges is to qualify students for the work market within a relatively short space of time (2 years).

Parallel to the survey conducted among the teaching staff, a survey was also conducted among the immigrant students with the aim of obtaining information on the problems that they encounter both in the college and in their day-to-day lives. It is hoped that the findings obtained from these two surveys will serve to elaborate appropriate ways and means to ease the absorption of immigrant students.

2. The Survey

2.1 Method

A questionnaire constructed for the purpose of the survey was distributed in a sample of four colleges in Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, Haifa, and the Northern region of Israel. The questionnaires were administered to the immigrant students who were on campus on the day allocated for data collection. A total of 294 questionnaires were completed.

Although the present article will emphasize the most prevalent opinions and attitudes, minority attitudes and opinions should not be dismissed and, therefore, these will also be reported.

3. Characteristics of the Immigrant Students

About 26.5% of the students were still attending preparatory courses for immigrant students and the rest were already enrolled in the practical engineering degree course in the following areas of specialization: mechanics (16.7%), industrial management (19.4%), electronics

(19.7%), electro-optics (0.7%), and computers (17.0%). All in all, 98% of the respondents were in their first year of study (including students in the preparatory courses).

All respondents studied in the mornings. About 68% were male students and about 32% were female students. Most of them (55%) were under 20 years old and 37% were 21-23 years old. It is worth noting that most veteran Israeli students are over 21 years old (having previously completed their military service). Most of them (93%) were not married, 6% were married and 2.4% had one child. Most of them (57%) had graduated from academic secondary schools, about 12% had graduated from vocational secondary schools, and about 10% had not graduated from either. About 15% had partial higher education and 6% described themselves as technicians. Most of them (72%) had been in the country for two years, 23% had been in the country for less than one year, and about 5% had been in the country for three years.

The majority were born in the former Soviet Union: about 82% in the European republics and about 10% in the Asian republics. About 8% of the immigrants were born in Central and Western Europe (Hungary, France, Italy).

4. **Motive for Attending the College**

In response to the question why they had decided to take this course of study, the most frequent response (73%) was: "I wanted a profession that could be learned in a short time" and only 9% said that they were in this course because they had not been accepted at a university.

5. **Factors Related to the College**

5.1 **Preparatory Courses**

About 31% of the respondents had not studied in the preparatory courses offered by the college. Among those who did, about 21% studied Hebrew and history, and about 16% studied Hebrew, English, physics, history, mathematics, and computers. In response to our question

whether they felt that the preparatory studies had helped them in their studies afterwards, 84% of the respondents felt that the preparatory studies had helped them and 16% felt they had not helped them. The reasons given for the positive response included: progress in Hebrew; refreshing previous knowledge; social reasons.

5.2 Language of Study

The responses to our question enquiring into their preference regarding the language of study are presented in Table 1.

(Insert Table 1)

As can be seen, the majority (74%) preferred to study in Hebrew; their main reason: "This is our language". However, the finding that 18.5% preferred to study in Russian should not be overlooked.

5.3 Teaching Methods

We enquired into their opinions regarding the teaching methods employed in the college. In the survey of the lecturers [13], it was found that most of them (84%) thought that there was no need to employ special teaching methods for the immigrants. In the present survey of the students, we found that about 71% of them thought that the methods employed were appropriate. However, there were also about 29% negative responses on this item; the reasons for the negative responses: "There is not enough individual attention"; "the teachers' attitude to immigrants is not good"; "there is no scope for thinking because the material is too simple"; "I can't manage with the language"; "it's not like university".

About 37% of the immigrants thought that the teaching methods employed in the college should be changed; the suggestions for change put forward by them: "More individual attention"; "university-level teaching material"; " easier exams"; "extra lessons in the immigrant's

language"; "entrance exams in Russian"; "additional hours in lessons that require writing in Hebrew"; "additional English lessons"; "additional computer lessons".

5.4 Classroom Composition

About 35% of the respondents studied in special classes for immigrants or in mixed classes in which immigrants form a majority (33%). About 22% of them studied in classes in which the umber of immigrant and veteran Israeli students is the same, and only a minority (11%) were in a class in which the immigrants form a minority.

However, in contrast to most frequent situation (i.e., special classes for immigrants or classes in which they are a majority), most of them (53%) expressed a preference for mixed classes with equal proportions of immigrants and veteran Israelis or mixed classes in which they would be a minority (28%). Only a minority of them (8%) preferred special classes of immigrants or classes in which immigrants would be a majority (11%).

In the opinion of most of the lecturers, class composition is not important and that most of the teachers were of the opinion that mixed classes in which immigrants are a minority should be preferred [13].

5.5 Timetable

Most of the respondents (93%) prefer to study in the morning, 3.1% would prefer afternoon classes, and 3.8% would prefer evening classes. The reasons given were:

For morning study: "more convenient" "saves time" "the mind is fresher" "the material is absorbed better" "easier to learn" "in order to work at a job afterwards".

For afternoon study: "in the morning they can do independent study at home".

For evening study: "in order to work at a job in the morning".

The immigrants were asked which subjects were most difficult for them and which were easiest. For the sake of brevity, we provide here only the responses given by 10 or more students:

The most difficult subjects: Introduction to statistics (29), English (24) electricity and network theory (19), industrial economics (16), civics (13), introduction to computers, programming and applications (13), physics (12), electricity and electronics theory (10).

The easiest subjects: mathematics (61), English (29), physics (14).

As can be seen, physics and English were considered to be easy by some of the immigrants, and difficult by others. It would be reasonable to suppose that this finding is related to their schooling in their country of origin.

5.6 Tests and Examinations

The students had been accustomed to oral examinations in the former Soviet Union. In Israel, open (essay type) written exams are more customary. Table 2 presents the responses to the question whether the examinations at their college are a good test of their knowledge.

(Insert Table 2)

About 78% of the immigrants see examinations as a valid way of testing their knowledge. However, 22% gave a negative response on this item; some of the reasons given for a negative response: "The exams demand too much in too short a time"; "the language problem".

The responses to the question on their preferences regarding examinations are summarized in Table 3.

(Insert Table 3)

This question relates to the type of examination: open (essay type), closed (American), or oral, and in which language: Hebrew, Russian, or French. As can be seen, 44% of the respondents prefer open (essay type) tests, about 53% prefer closed (American type) tests, and only 1.3%

prefer oral tests. Very few (1.7%) stated that they were interested in a combination of both open and closed tests, and only 1.3% preferred oral tests.

With regard to language, about 60% preferred to be tested in Hebrew (despite the difficulty), 21% in Russian, about 9% in French, and about 10% did not respond to this item.

5.7 Student Tutors

Some of the colleges have an arrangement whereby veteran Israeli students are allocated to immigrant students as personal tutors in order to facilitate the social and cultural absorption of the immigrants in the college. It transpires that 92% of the immigrants did not have a tutor of this type. Of the 8% that did have such a tutor, 43 claimed that the arrangement had not eased their absorption and 33 claimed that it had.

This topic should clearly be investigated further to see how to enhance the benefit that can be derived from a veteran Israeli students tutoring immigrant students.

6. Economic Factors and their Influence on Studies

6.1 Economic Situation

Most of the immigrant students (55%) described their current economic situation as worse than it had been in their country of origin and 45% stated that it was similar or even better. The majority (62%) of the respondents were not working and 38% were working in the following types of job: cleaning, dish washing, car washing, looking after children, computer work, sports coaching, delivery, cooking, construction work, or as security guards, grocery store workers, electricians, sales assistants, and waiters. These jobs do not require language proficiency. These finding are in line with Kossodji [14] and Sorensens & Enchautegi [15] who found a correlation between language profiency and job capacity.

Data on the students' living conditions are presented in Table 4:

(Insert Table 4)

It appears that 98% of the respondents live in reasonable conditions (up to 2 persons per room). The number of families per appartment is shown in Table 5:

(Insert Table 5)

Table 5 shows that about 46% of the respondents live in an apartment accomodating two or more families. To the question whether their living conditions permit them to do their homework satisfactorily, 70% replied in the positive and 30% said it was difficult to do homework at home. Indeed, only 79% did their homework at home.

In addition to optimal physical conditions for study, the students need books and equipment: 52% of the respondents stated that they could and 48% of them stated that they could not afford to buy books and equipment. In cases of need, the colleges do give or lend books to supplement the students' own acquisitions. It transpires that 67% of the respondents purchased books with their own money and only 22% stated that they do not buy books but obtain them or borrow them from the college.

7. **The Self-Image of the Immigrant Student**

Respondents were asked about their academic level as a student before their immigration to Israel and their current standard. The distribution of responses are presented in Table 6.

(Insert Table 6)

From Table 6 we can conclude that the perception of their status as students suffered subsequent to their immigration: Only 15.5% of them saw themselves as medium or poor students prior to their immigration whereas 59% saw themselves as such after their immigration. Goodenough [16] claimed that the optimal condition for cultural change is to provide new experiences that will serve to enhance the immigrant's self-image and sense of confidence. It should be noted, however, that 41% of the immigrants perceived themselves to be good or even excellent students. The possibility of "exploiting" the skills of such students

(for remuneration) to help solve the absorption problems of those immigrants experiencing difficulty in their studies should be given serious consideration.

8. **Dropout among Immigrant Students**

In view of the difficulties faced by immigrant students, we wondered how many of them might have considered dropping out from the college and what could be done to prevent any such dropout. It transpires that only 7% of the respondents had considered dropping out. Of these, 26 thought that they could be helped to change their decision in various ways with special emphasis on the provision of economic assistance.

9. **Social Absorption**

One of the most importance goals of educating immigrant students alongside veteran Israeli students is to facilitate social integration. This goal is considered to be no less important than academic achievement. Two questions were asked in this context: "Have you visited the homes of veteran Israeli students?" and "Have veteran Israeli students visited your home?"

It was found that 28% of the immigrants had visited the homes of veteran Israeli students, about 11% of them stated that they had done so many times, and 25% said that they had been visited by veteran Israeli students in their homes.

In view of their crowded living conditions, it seems that many of the immigrants preferred to meet friends outside the home and, therefore, also preferred not to visit the homes of the veteran Israelis. Thus, the responses to the above questions should not be seen as a significant indication of the degree of social integration between immigrant and veteran Israeli students.

10. **Attitudes to the College**

Three indirect questions were asked eliciting their opinions about the college, the degree course, and their area of specialization: "Would you recommend your college to an immigrant friend?"

"Would you recommend your degree course to an immigrant friend?" "Would you recommend your area of specialization to an immigrant friend?"

From their responses to these questions, we can conclude that 74% were satisfied with their college, 79% were satisfied with their degree course, and 81% were satisfied with their area of specialization. However, about one-fifth of the immigants were not satisfied and we should examine what can be done to ease their absorption in the college, in the degree course, and in the various areas of specialization.

The immigrants were also asked directly what should be done to make things easier for them. Many of their suggestions were concerned with the need for improvement in the attitude to immigrants on the part of the teachers and the administration and the network of ties between the immigrant students and the veteran Israeli students. The need for grants and loans was emphasized, and many suggested that the pace and rate of progress of the lessons should be slowed down. Minority suggestions included the need to adapt the curriculum to the immigrants, the wish have the important lessons in the morning when they not tired, and that choice of subjects be allowed. It transpires that although the teachers claim that employ every measure possible is taken to ease the absorption of the immigrants [13], many of the immigrant students feel that this is not the case.

11. Summary and Conclusions

The results of our survey lead us to conclude that the mode of absorption of the immigrant students enrolled for the practical engineering degree corresponds more closely to the assimilation model than the integration model. Most of them prefer to study in the Hebrew language and they are of the opinion that the teaching methods in their college are appropriate. Most of them think that the examinations in the college allow them to show their ability and they prefer to be tested in the Hebrew language despite the difficulty. Moreover, although most

of them are in special classes for immigrants, or in classes in which immigrant students form the majority, they would prefer to be in a class with equal proportions of immigrants and veteran Israeli students or in a class in which the immigrants are a minority. All these responses support the assimilation model and negate the granting of special status to immigrants.

Although many of them suffered a degree of depreciation in their self-perception as students subsequent to their immigration, only 7% had considered interrupting their studies. Their economic status also worsened after immigrating to Israel but, nevertheless, about 98% can be said to have reasonable living conditions even though about half of them live in appartments shared by two or more families. Their economic situation and living conditions influence the finding that only 79% of them do their homework at home, only 67% can afford to buy their own textbooks, and only 25% had been visited by veteran Israeli students at their homes.

The most frequently mentioned suggestions for improvement relate to the attitude to immigrants by teachers and the administration and the network of ties with veteran Israeli students. Nevertheless, 74% said that they would recommend the college at which they were studying and their course of study to an immigrant friend.

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Table I:

Distribution of Responses to the Question:
"In which language do you prefer to study?"

Response	Percent
Hebrew	73.9
Russian	18.5
English	4.5
Hebrew & Russian	1.7
Hebrew & English	0.7
French	0.7
TOTAL	100.0
N	287

Table II:

Distribution of Responses to the Question:

"In your opinion, did the exams that you took during the past year allow you to prove your ability?"

Response	Percent
No	22.2
Yes, to some extent	57.1
Yes, absolutely	20.7
TOTAL	100.0
N	275

Table III:

Distribution of Responses to the Question:

"What type of exam would best test your ability?"

Type of Exam	Percent
Open (essay type) in Hebrew	25.0
Closed (American type (in Hebrew)	34.9
Open in French	8.6
Open in Russian	10.3
Closed in Russian	8.9
Open and closed in Russian	1.7
Closed (no language specified)	9.2
Oral	1.4
TOTAL	100.0
N	292

Table IV:

Distribution of Students by Density of Living Accommodation

Persons per room	Percent
under 1.0	26.6
1.1 - 2.0	71.0
2.1 - 3.0	1.4
3.1 - 4.0	1.0
TOTAL	100.0
N	290

Table V:

Distribution of Responses to the Question:

"How many families share the apartment in which you live?"

No. of families	Percent
1	53.7
2	36.8
3	7.0
4	0.7
TOTAL	100.0
N	285

Table VI :

Perception of Academic Level before Immigration to Israel and in the present (in percent)

Level	Before	Present
Weak	2.1	7.7
Medium	13.4	51.2
Good	62.3	37.2
Excellent	22.2	3.9
TOTAL	100.0	100.0
N	284	285